Fall / Winter 2025

Farmland Working Group

Striving to protect food, families & farmland. Since 1999.

Proposed River Walk presentation draws 260 residents from Riverbank, Modesto and the County — *Overwhelming Opposition is Expressed*

On July 9, 2025, the City of Riverbank held a City Council-Planning Commission Joint Meeting Public Workshop. The City Council and Planning Commission heard a Presentation from Steve McMurtry with De Novo Planning Group on the River Walk Project. The meeting was held at the Riverbank Community Center to accommodate the anticipated number of attendees.

Approximately 260 people attended and fifty individuals stepped up to the microphone. Comments overwhelmingly focused on opposition to the River Walk project. Speakers raised concerns about the "real" cost of the proposed wastewater plant, many questioned paving over prime farmland with hundreds of acres of non-productive land available… and many expressed concerns about its impact on schools, traffic congestion and declining water restoration due to its proximity to the Stanislaus River.

Riverbank wants to expand its border by 1,535 acres – in 2016, the city was granted a 1,479-acre border expansion that was to accommodate growth for 20+ years

Stanislaus LAFCO is the agency that approves all border expansion requests. Riverbank's request flies in the face of LAFCO's mission: to discourage urban sprawl, protect prime farmland and encourage orderly growth. The expansion would be west of the city, on the best of the best farmland; 661.33 acres are LAFCO designated prime farmland. This land is also considered some of the best water recharge area in the county.

The border expansion is to accommodate a 2500-3000 - unit housing development referred to as River Walk. Riverbank's most recent Housing Element confirms available space for 3,591 residences within the city limits where there are public services and infrastructure such as police/fire, utilities and roads. The proposed development is adjacent to the Stanislaus River where portions of the Specific Plan lie within a FEMA designated "Known Flood Zone." The proposed project fails to provide an assessment of the aging levees and the impact of climate change on the river flow and flooding.

The City of Riverbank fails to propose a single alternate site within the City limits. There are 1,783 acres remaining in the Sphere of Influence (outside existing City Limits). There are hundreds of acres of non-prime farmland to the east. In order to stop the City from expanding to the west, 1,918 Riverbank citizens submitted a petition to place an Urban Limit Line initiative on the 2026 ballot.

There are 12 counties and 48 cities in the state that have effectively used ULLs to direct growth, protect farmland and stop costly sprawl. Urban Limit Lines are sometimes called Urban Growth Boundaries. Citizens, incorporated cities and counties can secure ULLs/UGBs. Once approved by voters, any significant changes to these lines generally require another public vote.

Organizations *Opposed* to the River Walk Project

Voters for Farmland

Friends of the Swainson's Hawk

Farmland Working Group

VALLEY LAND ALLIANCE
Nonprofit 501(c)3 Organization

V.I.P. Valley Improvement Projects for Social & Environmental Justice

SIERRA CLUB

LWV® League of Women Voters of Stanislaus County

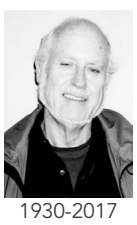
Stanislaus Audubon Society

FROM THE CHAIR

I've been involved with Farmland Working Group almost twenty-six years. In 1999, I was a founding director and the first chairperson. FWG is a small organization, we have no paid staff. The Board is committed; in the simplest term, we don't want Stanislaus County to have the outcome of Los Angeles County, the number one agricultural county in the nation for forty years, until 1960.

LA County is identified as a worst-case scenario of Sprawl… urban sprawl is expanding outward onto farmland and open space rather than practicing infill – building in and up and repurposing blighted areas – not preserving food producing land by directing growth to the poorest soils. It is associated with traffic congestion, air pollution, loss of a city's identity and the escalating cost of living.

In looking back at our newsletters, I found an article written by FWG Director, Rudy Platzek, in 2001; it is alarmingly relevant, these twenty-four years later.



1930-2017

Rudy's professional career included regional planning director for the Association of Bay Area Governments, where he prepared the Bay Area's first regional plan. He owned a planning firm, and prepared city and county General Plans (GPs) throughout California.

The future for farmland here in the three county northern San Joaquin Valley lies in the hands of its urban citizens.

Spring 2001

by Rudy Platzek

This is so because the urban public comprises more than 90% of the total population of the region. By their sheer numbers and voting power, it will be up to the people of the region's cities, towns and hamlets to decide how their urban settlement will continue to grow, where they will grow and whether they will have stabilized urban edges, beyond which is permanently protected farmland and open space.

Today, three quarters of California voters support the idea of setting up urban boundaries to stop sprawl and preserve agricul-tural land and open space.

Elsewhere in California, urban voters are beginning to get with it. In a growing trend, voters in 19 San Francisco Bay Area cities already have established urban growth boundaries to control sprawl and protect their rural areas from development. Such tight growth boundaries around urban areas limit outward expansion, redirecting development to planned compact growth areas and infill sites. **In the November 2000 local elections, voters throughout the state established or strengthened their urban growth boundaries and approved growth management, open space and farmland protection measures, as demonstrated by the following nearby examples:**

- Alameda County. Voters approved drawing tight urban limit lines around Dublin, Pleasanton, Livermore, Sunol and Castro Valley.
- City of San Jose. The election strengthened the city-established urban growth boundary by requiring voter approval to any changes to the boundary.
- City of Sonoma. An urban growth boundary at the city's current sphere of influence won voter approval.
- City of Rohnert Park. Voters approved an urban limit line drawn by the City Council during the general plan adoption process.
- City of Tracy. A citizen-initiated measure to cut the number of housing permits in half won voter approval.
- City of Davis. A parcel tax to fund an open space and farmland acquisition program received the necessary two-thirds voter approval.

These voters understand that unless they say no to continuing sprawl and say yes to better planning, their community's quality of life will be paved over for good. If the urban citizens of our region do not want to repeat the same mistakes of the now-paved-over Santa Clara Valley and Los Angeles, they will need to speak resoundingly for sprawl control through their advocacy and votes for urban growth boundaries, planning for compact growth and farmland protection.

Voters overwhelmingly extended SOAR Initiatives until 2050

Looking back to the beginning of SOAR, I find one of the most rewarding aspects of the initial campaign was switching from playing defense to playing offense. Trying to stop each inappropriate urban sprawl project was destined to ultimately fail. Citizens of the San Fernando Valley sadly learned that.

The development of farmland and open space buffers was in overdrive in the 1990s. Grassroots volunteers could not match the energy of well-paid developers at endless planning commission hearings, etc. But we knew citizens will mobilize for an occasional big fight if the results will be significant gains. SOAR allowed us to fight one major political battle. If we won, developers of farmland would have to come to the citizens for voter approval. We were able to turn the tables on the influential development industry by empowering voters.

So much rode on the success of that first SOAR campaign in 1995. Had we lost, our momentum to take SOAR countywide would have been gone. Our opponents far outspent us and used a highly deceptive campaign to attack SOAR. One of their ads in the 1995 campaign featured thugs with guns sticking out of their belts. It claimed SOAR would increase crime. Deceptive campaigns from our opponents continued. On the eve of the 1998 countywide SOAR campaign, opponents plastered freeway ramps with signs falsely claiming SOAR increases your taxes. But the citizens weren't fooled. SOAR won and its public support solidified. That's why we were successful in re-upping SOAR during the 2016 campaign, in spite of more heavy opposition from the development industry.

by Steve Bennett

SAVE OPEN SPACE & AGRICULTURAL RESOURCES SOAR

SOAR COMMUNITIES with Urban Limit Lines

Ventura County	Oxnard
Camarillo	Port Hueneme
Fillmore	Santa Paula
Lake Sherwood	Santa Rosa Valley
Malibu/Yerba Buena	Santa Susana Knolls
Moorpark	Simi Valley
Oak Park	Thousand Oaks
Ojai	Ventura